"So, FSO, did we integrate our mortars effectively?"

By Sergeant First Class Russell W. Scott

All maneuver units require indirect fires to win battles. Mortar sections and platoons provide the maneuver commander responsive indirect fires in the close fight.

Military history has repeatedly demonstrated the effectiveness of mortars. Their rapid, high-angle fires are invaluable against dug-in enemy troops and targets in defilade that are not vulnerable to attack by direct fires. *FM 7-90, Tactical Employment of Mortars* states that, by virtue of their organization at both the company and battalion levels, mortars provide valuable and responsive fires that ease the combat tasks of company/troop, battalion/squadron and brigade/regimental commanders. The bottom line—the primary role of the mortars is to provide responsive, indirect fires to the maneuver commander.

Sound good? Well, it *isn't* happening!

What I see at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, California, is rotational units' inability to achieve the mortar effects desired during combined arms operations. I continually see the task force struggle to integrate its mortars properly into the scheme of maneuver even though the mortar platoon leader is encouraged to spend time at the tactical operations center (TOC) during the planning phases of all operations.

Am I implying that the task force commanders, fire support officers (FSOs) and mortar platoon leaders do not know their jobs? Not at all. Through many rotations, I have met some of the most technically and tactically proficient officers and NCOs in the US Army.

So what's the problem? It's not that mortars lack target list worksheets, overlays or fire support execution matrices (FSEMs). For the most part, they each have a specific task and purpose during the various phases of the operation.

You might ask, "Well, isn't that integration of mortars into the fire plan?" And I would answer, "Yes and No." I said only "specific task and purpose"—the mortar platoon's mission also must be realistic.

Many times I have read a task force operations order (OPORD) where the mortar platoon's mission is to fix the advance guard main body (AGMB) or the main body (MB). That is asking too much of a mortar platoon.

First, commanders and FSOs must give mortars a realistic mission, one within the weapon's capabilities. This problem can be resolved by the FSO's focusing on high-payoff targets (HPTs) that mortars can affect. Additionally, the FSO must provide the essential mortar tasks, their purposes and desired effects for the realistic missions. Both the mortar platoon and the observers who will be calling for fire require realistic, clearly understood missions.

Mortars destroy, neutralize or suppress the enemy, allowing the maneuver element to close with and kill him. For example during a recent rotation, I observed a mortar platoon during a force-on-force movement-to-contact mission. The mortars moved about one kilometer behind the lead maneuver element.

The mortars occupied Mortar Point Three when the lead element (M1A2 tanks and M2 Bradleys) started to receive fire from enemy anti-tank (AT) systems to the front. The observer responsible for this area called the FSO with a fire mission, which was relayed to the mortars. The enemy, consisting of two BRDMs (Soviet-type wheeled vehicle) with AT5s, was using a hill mass and a wadi-system for cover and to gain firing angle advantages.

The mortars adjusted fire onto the target to try to suppress the BRDMs. Unfortunately, the target survived due to a lack of volume of fires. The first BRDM pulled back for cover, forcing the second to reposition.

Mortars received a second fire mission from the FSO. Using three and then four guns, the mortars quickly adjusted onto the target with suppressive effects.

Meanwhile the task force commander halted the movement of the lead element approximately three kilometers from the target (maximum range of the AT5 is 3,750 meters). His task for the mortars, which had limited ammunition, was to destroy the AT5s. The mortars fired 14 suppressive missions, but due to terrain and the ability of the BRDMs to quickly reposition, the BDRMs survived.

About the time the mortars went "black" on ammunition, the task force commander ordered the lead element to close with and destroy the enemy. Five tanks and three Bradleys later, it was all over.

This engagement could have been a classic example of synchronization had the lead element taken advantage of the

mortars to suppress the enemy's direct fire weapons as the friendly force advanced. The outcome of the battle could have been different.

No one can foresee the future, and it's easy to pick apart someone's course of action after the fact, but this engagement illustrates that the commander made the conscious decision *not* to integrate his battlefield assets to accomplish the mission. The commander chose to use his weapons one at a time instead of in concert with each other (mass), losing the advantages the integrated operation would have given him. As a result, the task force did not accomplish the mission.

How do units use mortars more effectively? In addition to the commander's giving the mortar platoon realistic missions, the task force fire supporters and decision makers need to establish command relationships to routinely work with mortars, ensure mortar leaders participate in the task force military decision-making process (MDMP) and train with mortars at home station.

Command Relationships. Relationships between the mortar platoon leader and his task force commander, battalion operations officer and FSO must be special, as stated in FM 7-90. The FM also states that the FSO and the mortar platoon leader must have a unique relationship. They both must understand the battalion commander's intent for fires and work closely together to see that it is carried out.

Well, that's what doctrine says. But it's an area units really have to work on.

During my time as an observer/controller (O/C), about 80 percent of the mortar platoon leaders do not know their FSOs. They talk once or twice one week before coming to the NTC—one can only imagine how that impacts on the planning process. Mortars usually are pushed to the side and haphazardly worked into the fire plan as an afterthought.

Military Decision-Making Process. The mortar platoon leader or platoon sergeant needs to be involved in the task force's MDMP at home station as well as during Combat Training Center (CTC) rotations. This facilitates the FSO's, operations officer's (S3's) and commander's better understanding of the capabilities and limitations of mortars.

After the mission analysis briefing to the task force commander, the commander provides specific guidance for mortars, including the essential fire support tasks (EFSTs) with task, purpose, method and desired effects. This focuses the mortar platoon throughout the planning and preparation phases.

The mortar platoon leader and (or) platoon sergeant must actively participate in the course of action (COA) development and wargaming stages of the MDMP. This ensures mortars will be integrated into and synchronized with the task force scheme of maneuver and defensive plan. The process will define specific mortar fire missions, movement triggers, positioning and resupply requirements.

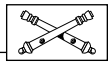
Without the participation of mortar leaders in the MDMP, decision makers can make erroneous assumptions about what the mortar platoon can and cannot do.

Home-Station Training. Mortar training should start with all related fire support elements in the task force to establish rapport and a good working relationship among these elements and promote a better understanding of the requirements involved in integrating mortars.

Mortars must be an integral part of unit training events, such as command post exercises (CPXs) in the motor pool, task force and company-level gunnery training, and field training exercises (FTXs).

This article does not tell everything units need to do to integrate mortars with maneuver—it just gives a few suggestions based on observations of rotations at the NTC.

If units implement these suggestions, they can go a long way toward reversing the negative trend of failing to integrate mortars into combined arms operations.



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Senior Fire Support Conference
30 September—4 October

The 2002 Senior Fire Support Conference will be held from Monday 30 September until Friday 4 October at the Field Artillery School, Fort Sill, Oklahoma. The conference will cover subjects related to current, future, joint and allied fires.

In addition to brigade-level and above Active Component (AC) and Reserve Component (RC) Army and Marine Field Artillery commanders with their command sergeants major (CSMs), the conference attendees will include Army and Marine senior commanders; selected senior leaders from all services and our allies; some retired general officers; and US Field Artillery Association corporate members.

The main conference for all attendees will start on Wednesday 1 October. Monday and Tuesday will have special sessions for Army AC and Army National Guard (ARNG) Field Artillery commanders and their CSMs.

Monday will be conference registration for special session attendees followed by an evening icebreaker. Tuesday's sessions will discuss FA issues, including a status report on the Senior Field Artillery Leaders' Conference held at the Field Artillery School in May. On Tuesday afternoon, ARNG commanders will have a special session as will the CSMs, both AC and ARNG.

Other conference attendees will register for the conference Tuesday afternoon.

As the conference theme and details of the conference agenda are finalized, they will be posted on the Senior Fire Support Conference website on the Fort Sill Homepage: sill-www.army.mil/sfsc. If readers have questions before the website is online, they can contact Colonel Gary Swartz, Director of the Fire Support and Combined Arms Operations Department, FA School, at swartzl@sill.army.mil.